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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MINDANAO WOMEN CONTRIBUTING TO PEACE

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¶1. (U) Summary. Civil society groups are actively contributing to the peace process in Mindanao, including some impressive women's organizations. The Mission continues its outreach to and support of many such groups as part of our overall strategy of advancing the peace process in Mindanao. End Summary.

Bangsamoro Women's Foundation for Peace and Development

¶2. (U) During a June 20-22 visit to Cotabato City with DCM (septel), POL intern met with leaders of two key women's groups who are actively promoting the peace process while supporting women's empowerment in the region. The Bangsamoro Women's Foundation for Peace and Development was established shortly after the 1996 peace agreement between the Philippine Government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The Foundation, with about 17,000 members throughout the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), works to improve women's participation in politics and to better the lives of women in Mindanao through livelihood enhancement programs and employment assistance. In addition, its staff conducts trainings on combating domestic violence and promoting gender sensitivity.

¶3. (U) The Foundation played a key role in identifying beneficiaries for USAID's "LEAP" Program to reintegrate former MNLF combatants over the past decade, as well as in contributing to the Asia Foundation's Barangay/Municipal Planning and Budgeting Program and a UNFPA-assisted maternal and child primary and reproductive health care program.

¶4. (U) Currently, the Foundation is implementing a State Department-funded project under EAP's Women's Issues Fund. The US\$64,000 project began in September 2006 and has organized women's associations and cooperatives in ten of the more isolated communities of the ARMM. The Foundation provides training and technical assistance to these associations on economic livelihood, financial management, and marketing skills. The project has a second component devoted to women's empowerment and increased political participation; the staff has conducted training for women on leadership arbitration and mediation, gender development, women's rights, and team building.

¶5. (U) The leaders of the Foundation reiterated that their larger mission is to improve the prospects for peace and development in Mindanao via increased women's participation in the political process and to increase the economic independence of Muslim women in the ARMM. While strongly supportive of a peace agreement between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as the only way in which lasting peace and stability will truly take root, they expressed little optimism that the two sides can forge an accord very soon. They nonetheless voiced their gratitude to the USG for our funding of their programs and for our

contributions to peace in Mindanao.

The Bangsamoro Women Solidarity Forum

¶16. (U) The Bangsamoro Women Solidarity Forum encourages greater political awareness and participation of Bangsamoro women throughout the ARMM, in recognition of the traditional under-representation of women in ARMM politics. One of its core goals is to facilitate a more active role for women in the ongoing peace talks between the Philippine Government and the MILF; the Forum is an "official observer" to these negotiations. The Forum has set up public fora in major cities and towns within the ARMM not only to educate women about the status of the ongoing talks but more importantly to hear the opinions of Mindanao residents and give them a venue to raise specific concerns.

¶17. (U) Forum officials also work to educate women on human rights laws and to help them with legal issues, including a Human Rights Education and Paralegal Training seminar in Jolo. Under the umbrella of the Local Governance Support Program in the ARMM (LGSPA) -- funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) -- the Forum is now taking part in post-May 14 election assessments in the ARMM.

¶18. (U) Forum leaders expressed strong support for peace talks, which they noted were an essential component in achieving durable peace and development in Mindanao. However, they also noted doubts of a final accord in the very near future. They have encouraged both sides to take into full consideration the views of Mindanao's women during the negotiations and in the post-accord era. They welcomed international assistance in bringing greater peace and prosperity to the people of Mindanao.

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Comment

¶19. (SBU) Women throughout Mindanao have traditionally been politically and economically disenfranchised, with a few notable exceptions such as former Senator Santanina Tillah Rasul. Civil society such as these women's groups is now actively contributing to the peace process in Mindanao. The Mission continues its outreach to and support of many such groups as part of our overall strategy of advancing the peace process in Mindanao.

KENNEY